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Supernatural Sentinels: Managing Threshold Fears via Apotropaic Agents

“It is perception molded by imagination that gives us the outward world that we know;” so stated Susanne Langer in her 1953 work *Feeling and Form*. While she is specifically writing about art, her observation is equally applicable to this discussion of threshold fears and the apotropaic devices created by cultures around the world to manage those fears. Humans have always lived in a world fraught with destructive forces that dramatically impact their daily lives. Certainly these concerns have varied in their specificity across time and space; however, the underlying fear of an uncontrollable world remains the same. Our most fundamental instincts inform us that survival requires recognition of and protective action against those elements capable of inflicting harm upon us. This, of course, is a relatively straightforward matter when the elements in question are in some degree manageable; but when we perceive those destructive powers as invisible, unpredictable, incomprehensible, or beyond our control, or as Clifford Geertz asserts, “...life threatens to dissolve into a chaos of thingless names and nameless things...” (1973:91), we need to imagine recognizable faces for them, since tangible manifestations of evil seem easier to confront and control, in order to protect ourselves from their influence. This need has inspired people to invent fantastic creatures, either wholly unlike any natural beings or, more commonly, as grotesque marriages of chimeric

animals or as creatures imbued with supernatural powers whose malevolent intent targets humankind. Such beliefs naturally necessitated the development of preventative and curative counteragents.

This paper is specifically concerned with the counteragents or apotropaia used to protect the thresholds of domestic structures and their efficacy in assuaging the fears that precipitate their application. It will first explore the ideas behind the etymology of fear, followed by a reflection on the paradoxical nature of thresholds, and finally conclude with a brief overview of threshold apotropaic devices employed around the world.

When we consider the term *fear*, we either imagine a formless impression of dread and vulnerability or conjure up a specific scenario that causes us to experience the sensation we identify as ‘being afraid’. The etymology of the term and its cognates, however, reveals a connection between the term and precise circumstances in which many people found themselves and recognized as life threatening. Developed from Old English *faer* meaning danger or peril, it is a cognate with Old Saxon *far* meaning ambush; Old Icelandic *far* meaning misfortune and plague; and the Gothic derivative from *ferja*—referring to “one who lies in wait, an observer or a spy” (Chambers 1988:372-373). This idea of ambush seems to underlie the use of threshold apotropaia the world over. Whether the perpetrators of evil upon a household are specifically identified as witches, fairies, demons, or the evil eye or are envisioned as nebulous malignant forces, they are all imagined to “lie in wait” for their opportunity to insinuate their way into homes and barns, crossing thresholds at gates, doors, windows, hearths, roofs, and wall intersections. Due to their supernatural nature, it would be impossible for human agency alone to stand guard against them; only equally powerful supernatural agents could both affect impassable barriers and remain vigilantly watchful.

While the evils of the world hovered around the exteriors of home and farmstead, the people within found themselves (again through “perception and imagination”) negotiating a sense of control and safety through their belief and faith in apotropaic applications. The concept of negotiation is here apt due to the inherently paradoxical nature of thresholds as they represent and function as the most protective and the most vulnerable points in any structure. For example, doors provide entrance into space sheltered from the natural elements, physical threats, or intruders, while they simultaneously breach the integrity of a structure’s wall. Thus the very path to safety is also one of the most inviting for danger. Windows permit essential light and air enabling inhabitants to conduct their daily activities; however, windows also allow outsiders to be privy to insiders’ movements, possessions, and secrets. Smoke holes or chimneys conduct the hearth-fire smoke up and out of the home, but unlike windows and doors, can never be closed and, thus, invites free commerce for any malicious traffic directly into the house through the hearth. In each instance, those openings that establish a sense of well-being and security paradoxically produce feelings of unease and vulnerability. As if this dualistic paradox wasn’t enough, thresholds have long been perceived as having a third dimension. Not only are they the demarcations for the dichotomies of in/out, us/them, and safety/danger, but they simultaneously establish a liminal zone that operates both physically and psychologically: physically, because the threshold itself is neither inside nor outside the structure and thus creates the concrete boundary between inhabitants and evil and provides a solid canvas upon which amulets can be attached; and psychologically, because liminality suggests existence within a spatial and temporal sector outside mundane reality. It is in this realm that supernatural forces reside and, therefore, it is where apotropaic agents would be the most effective mediators.

The question of efficacy is, of course, not one of empirical testing of iron, dead cats, urine, red thread, or any number of other administrations, to determine their expediency in defusing malicious intent. Anthropologist George Ewart Evans explains that the efficacy of apotropaic devices is measured in their ability to make the house or farmstead "...at least *feel* a more secure place..." (1966:55). He goes on to say, "Magic, whatever its pretensions, is ultimately addressed to the mind of the person or persons concerned, its exterior object being no more than an extrapolation of his own desires or fears; and although—like prayer or ritual—its direct effect on external reality is almost certainly nil, its influence on the mind of the participant might be considerable" (1966:55). Therefore, protecting oneself and one's home from Geertz's "thingless names" and "nameless things" through rituals and objects allowed (and continues to allow) people to believe they can exert some measure of control over the evils that co-habitate this world. It is this *sense* of safety, not the actuality of safety, that permits people to live productively.

In studying the ways in which cultures manifest this sense of safety, I have found that the range of apotropaic devices across cultures and time, while broad in their variations, are relatively limited in their materials and applications. The objects used as apotropaia can be categorized into seven groups: plants, animals, metals, household objects, colors, abstract symbols, and words. We can further analyze these objects in terms of function, disposition, and attending ritual. Protective wards function in four ways: by repelling, trapping, reversing, or neutralizing the supernatural threat. An object's composition and function are further enhanced (or possibly determined) by its disposition, which is either externally applied so as to be readily visible, buried, or concealed above ground. Finally, the rituals or ritualistic behaviors that

attend the application or disposition of the protective devices provide the catalyst to engage their powers. Category, function, disposition, and ritual operate as a system with each aspect dependent upon the others for meaning, potency, and agency. The challenge for researchers of what archaeologist Ralph Merrifield called “The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic” is to have access to this contextual system in order to make the most accurate interpretations. Too often, however, the system or context has been deconstructed prior to analysis and irrevocably lost.

So what determines a particular choice of amulet? There appear to be general rules for the use, application, or disposition of the different apotropaic categories. Plants are usually hung over doors and windows, strewn across thresholds and into corners, or burnt to send protective energy up the chimney. The seasonality of plants determines when they can be gathered and used. In the British Isles mugwort, for example, was to be hung over the door only on Midsummer Eve to scare away demons and witches. Other plants with associations of eternal life and holiness, like holly, were planted around the exterior of a house and its wood provided the material for the threshold. Oak, like holly, rowan, yew, and hawthorn contained inherent protective properties, and was used to construct doors, thresholds, windowsills, and doorjambs and lintels. This type of apotropaia is the most elusive to document as researchers can easily overlook its significance unless already aware of such apotropaic application.

Animals or animal parts seldom appear displayed except when their likenesses are wrought in some other material like iron. There are rare references to nailing a wolf’s head to a door to cure bewitchment, but most animals, either whole or part, emerge from concealed spaces—either buried under thresholds, hearths, gates, and house foundations or found in spiritual

middens located in chimneys, walls, and roofs. Chickens, cats, rats, and horse and cow skulls comprise the most commonly used animals as guardians or sacrifices to ensure household safety. These animals represent common and easily accessible specimens as well as, in the case of cats and rats, those most often associated with witches' familiars. As such, they illustrate the complexity inherent in apotropaic belief and the difficulty of accurately interpreting such beliefs. The inclusion of a cat in a spiritual midden could simultaneously indicate it was intended as a sympathetic magic element, a sacrificial object, or a distracting object to divert the witch's attention. To further complicate the understanding of particular apotropaia, it is possible the cat could be used in each of these ways without any overt clues indicating the shift from one function to another. Then, too, there are the accompanying objects found with the cat and the arrangement and orientation of the whole plus any information about the attending rituals that must be considered before a more precise conclusion can be drawn about the function or functions of the animal in particular and the spiritual midden in general.

Metal objects are somewhat more straightforward and almost always appear hanging from doors or windows without reference to particular times or seasons. The most commonly used apotropaic metal, iron, was from its beginnings considered "numinous and taboo" as it fell from the sky as meteorites. Ewart Evans suggests, "It's superiority over stone and bronze and the superstitious awe surrounding iron smiths likely added to the magical associations of iron and iron objects" (Ewart Evans 1966:56). This may account for iron being considered the most powerful of all apotropaic materials.

The category of household items used as apotropaia includes a wide variety of objects ranging from brooms to thread to shoes. Worn out shoes, and most especially children's shoes, constitute the most frequently used object in

spiritual middens found in chimneys, walls, roofs, windowsills, and under thresholds. Close to a thousand such items have been found across the world and are theorized to act as witch traps.

In conjunction with household items, plants, and symbols, the color red most often appears as both a powerful amulet in itself and as a power-enhancing agent for other objects. Painting doors and windowsills red, tying red cloth or thread over doors or to trees by gates, surrounding a dwelling with red berried trees and shrubs, or painting red symbols on doorsteps all illustrate utilizing red's ability to protect houses and their inhabitants from evil.

Apotropaic symbols appear as abstract designs like spirals, circles and other geometric shapes, or swastikas carved into, painted onto, or applied as mosaics on exterior walls, doorframes, doorsteps, and hearth supports and as objects fashioned from wood or iron as doorknockers. Vernacular architecture expert Paul Oliver has documented in his book *Shelter, Sign & Symbol* practices from Asia and Africa of women performing the daily task of painting protective symbols on and around the thresholds of their huts—rituals that continue still today.

The final apotropaic category, words, most often consist of nonsense words, coded abbreviations, divine names, sigils, and repeated letters. Examples have been discovered in spiritual middens, buried under thresholds and hearths, and carved onto hearth supports and lintels. Unfortunately, objects inscribed with magical text are often taken out of their apotropaic context and translated by linguistic researchers who privilege the text over the context, thus disregarding the importance of their operating systems. Currently, this is the issue with a group of Babylonian Demon Bowls under study by historians of ancient history.

This brief glimpse into the phenomenon of translating the fears associated with living in a volatile world into recognizable adversaries and the apotropaia that can be wielded against them, has admittedly been superficial due to time constraints. While much evidence exists to support the premise that humans from all cultures have used or currently still employ apotropaic devices to protect their dwellings' thresholds from misfortune, this is an area that remarkably receives little attention from researchers. Studying threshold apotropaic beliefs and behaviors can provide insights into the human processes of negotiating a sense of existential security. Novelist A.S. Byatt wrote, "We are defined by the lines we choose to cross or be confined by" (1990:467). I would add, through our perceptions and imaginations, our use of apotropaia plays a significant role in determining what and where those lines—or thresholds-- lay.

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Panel: Threshold States and the Natural & Human Built Environment

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